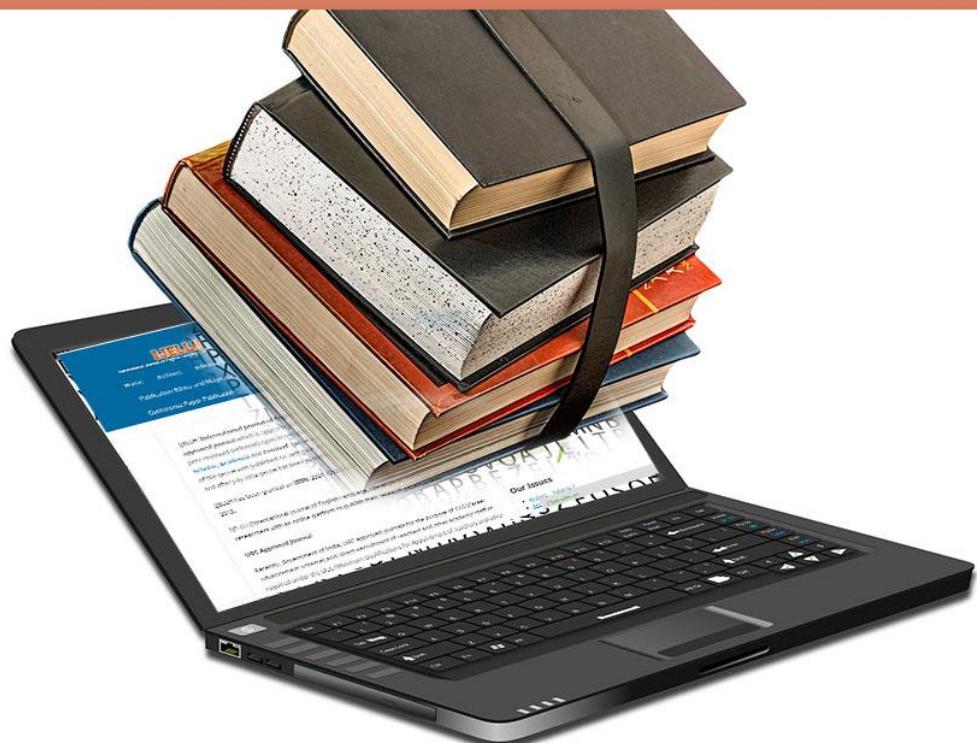


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Emboldening Theatre: Nudity in *Draupadi* and the Politics of Public Censorship

Abstract

This paper analyses the changing trends in Indian theatre. It explores the nudity in H. Kanhaiyalal's play *Draupadi*. The play challenged the sensibilities of Indian audience. The various reactions from women themselves to H. Sabitri's act is analysed in detail. The censorship by the public imposed on the play is the result of the patriarchal systems that are at work. The nudity subverts the erotic notions associated with it. It becomes a form of protest against her rapist. Thus, it becomes somatic protest.

Keywords-theatre, body, nudity, censorship, protest

Women theatre artists in India seldom experiment with bold somatic performances owing to the apparent patriarchal cultural codes in the country. H. Kanhaiyalal's *Draupadi* demonstrates a bold somatic performance sequence through the titular character, Draupadi, the violated tribal woman. H. Sabitri appears as Draupadi, stripping herself in front of her rapist, a performance that shocked the conventionalities of theatre in India. Nudity in *Draupadi* is in itself a performance text having serious implications on its gendered audience. *Draupadi* is adapted from a story of the same name by Mahashweta Devi. *Draupadi*'s adaptation into theatre has left a more profound social impact than the story, evidently visible

in the social ripples generated by the play. Is it a translation of ‘body writing’ into theatrical language? How significant is Sabitri’s act in transforming the trends of Indian theatre? Does *Draupadi* challenge public sensibilities? The above questions must be pursued to understand the changing trends in Indian theatre.

Sabitri’s climatic act is a translation of écriture feminine or body writing into performative language. Performative language works majorly through physical signifiers and rhetorical gestures. The meaning generation process is quite confusing because of the hierarchy within the spectators. Nudity signifies multiple things for the various sections of the spectators. A single signifier attains multiple signifieds. Écriture Feminine involves the development of counter-narratives, exclusive female narratives to dismantle the existing narratives on female body. Écriture feminine works on and through Draupadi’s body, and it generates polarising reactions in its stratified women spectators. Extremities in the reception to nudity on stage reveal that *Draupadi*’s women spectators are rooted in two opposing planes of semantic existence- the Semiotic and the Symbolic orders. While some of the women spectators were able to replicate the act in reality, some were horrified by the nude act on stage. Language of the Symbolic, dominate the mainstream theatre in India. The Semiotic realm remain unexplored, with few women/men artists posing challenges to the foundationalism apparent in theatre. The appropriateness of a woman’s body dictated by the Symbolic order is subverted by the performing artist, using nudity as a deconstructive strategy. Nudity, as a performance text, challenges mystified female body. Helene Cixous demystifies the patriarchal conception of female body as an erotic object with the paradoxical idea that in a female body’s eroticism lies its immense possibilities. Cixous remarks thus, in *The Laugh of the Medusa*:

If there is a “propriety of woman”, it is paradoxically her capacity to deappropriate unselfishly: body without end, without appendage, without

principal “parts”. If she is a whole, she is a whole composed of parts that are wholes, not simple partial objects but a moving, limitlessly changing ensemble, a cosmos tirelessly traversed by Eros, an immense astral space not organized around any one sun that’s any more of a star than others. (Cixous 889)

Ecriture feminine, which according to Cixous exists in the body realm, is transgressive and rule-transcending. It allows for a free play of meanings. Nudity is a physical signifier which attains variant signifieds at the point of reception by an audience. The performance act shifts the focus from the authority of the author, director, or screenplay to the act itself. In that way *Draupadi* is post-Dramatic in its nature.

Kanhailal’s theatre, rooted in the Manipuri tradition, is one of the finest examples of indigenous theatre in India. Kanhailal’s theatre emerges from the situated reality of Manipuris. *Draupadi* is no different. But it holds a universal appeal for subaltern voices across the world. Kanhailal’s theatre emerges from the cultural resources of Manipur. His acting method originates from the organic principles of life in Manipur. Manipuri culture is primarily agrarian, with great importance bestowed on gestures and community dances, which involve bodily movements. During Holi, Manipuri men and women dance the “Thabal Chongba” (Bharucha 23) marked by vigorous jumps that generate a communal energy. Rustom Bharucha writes about the prime significance of movement in the theatre of Kanhailal. Kanhailal says, “Movements have to be like waves” (Bharucha 24). Kanhailal explores the fluidity and limitlessness of movement through his plays. There is a fusion of inner energy and physical movement in Kanhailal’s acting method. The indigenous martial art form Thang-ta has a great influence on actors of Kanhailal’s theatre. Kanhailal’s actors are trained in the use of sounds from different resonators of the body. The physicality of Kanhailal’s theatre is the point of intersection between Kanhailal’s acting method and

Brechtian notion of V-effect or the alienation effect. For Brecht, *Gestus* was a means of creating alienation in the readers. The demonstrative nature of acting by Kanhaiyalal's actors is similar to Brechtian *gestus*. Brecht used the term *Gestus* to refer to socialized gesticulation as opposed to psychological facial expression, and the rhetorical, crafted gestures of a performer. 'To show *gestus*' came to mean "to present artistically the mutable socio-economic and ideological construction of human behaviour and relations" (Mumford 54). *Gestus*, according to John Willet is at once "gesture and gist", a combination of physical expressions and social ideas or meanings. *Gestus* is the representation of significant gestures which are shaped by society and history. Gests convey the power relations and social structures that can be changed.

If one is able to see other power relations in society along with the Bourgeois/Proletariat, *Draupadi*'s nude act is an act in the tradition of gestic act, which reveals the socialized meanings of a woman's physicality. Though the act can't be classified as a classic *gestus* act, the ambiguity of Brecht's own definition of *gestus* makes it alright to call it one. The act serves as a tool for *Verfrumdungseffekt* or the alienation effect. The act is a shocker, a violation of conventionality, and puts its spectators into a state of moral and social shock. Brecht defines V-effect as something designed to free a socially conditioned phenomena from the clutches of familiarity so that a spectator may grasp the ideological foundations beneath it. When Sabitri appears naked on stage, spectators are not just reminded of Draupadi, the violated tribal woman, but also of the ideological assumptions underlying a woman's violated body. Nudity alienates the spectators from a particularity. The spectators witness a woman's nude body, but ripped of all its patriarchal connotations. Instead of being a spectacle to the voyeuristic eye of the phallic world, it awakens the spectator conscience. In the age of media and cinema, woman's body is a sensual spectacle for the camera's eye, Sabitri's act prompts her watchers to think, to reflect on the moral depreciation of the society. The familiar idea of

a woman's body is subverted. Brechtian idea of social action via theatre was manifested in the social reaction against Army violence in Manipur. Thirty Manipuri women protested naked with a plugcard which read "Indian Army: Rape Us" on 15 July 2004 in front of 17 Assam Rifles unit in Imphal. It was the manifestation of a fierce anger against the rape of Manipuri women by Army personnel. In the above protest they were fighting against the rape of 32 year old Thangjam Manorama. Theatre's potential as an agent of social action is testified in the incident.

In the absence of a central authority for theatre censorship, restrictions on plays in India are often the result of public protest. But public protest is not free of politics. The public protest reveals the underlying social norms that govern the public sensibility. The reactions to *Draupadi* is not one of absolute singularity. But interestingly it is often the opinions of an exclusive group that is projected as the public opinion. Exclusivist groups with vested interests are masters at creating the *illusion of majority* considering the large number of passive citizens in the civil society. The grand narrative of Indian Culture is at play in the wide spread protests against *Draupadi*. What legitimizes this grand narrative is the pertinent question that must be addressed. According to Lyotard, narrative knowledge has an immediate legitimization. The narratives legitimize themselves through *language games*. So what is the role of people in the workings of a grand narrative? He writes:

[...] the people are only that which actualizes the narratives: once again, they do this not only by recounting them but also by listening to them and recounting themselves through them; in other words, by putting them into "play" in their institutions—thus by assigning themselves the posts of narratee and diegesis as well as the post of narrator [...] Narratives, as we have seen, determine criteria of competence, and/or illustrate how they are to be applied.

They thus define what has the right to be said and done in a culture in question
(Lyotard 23)

Grand narrative defines what is right and wrong in a culture. As a culture structured by patriarchy, Indian cultural narrative is harsh to a woman's autonomy and independence. The narratives take hold of public psyche through language. As Virginia Woolf famously puts it, language is essentially paternal. Draupadi, in stripping herself in front of her violator, adopts a performative language, free from the clutches of a paternal Language. It is as I have already mentioned at the beginning of the article, an exclusively feminine expression of protest, which stands against the Lacanian Symbolic order- the realm of the Father. But what creates a polarity in spectator reactions to the play? When the play was staged at a Bengali theatre, some women were forced into screams, some walked out, and men went into a silence of shock. (*Written on the Body* Banerjee) The walkout by a section of women spectators, and a host of strong protests against the play largely by women than men (in Kanhaiyal's own words) raises questions about the ideological workings of the grand narrative which defines a woman's body for her. The public protest is a testimony to the very system Kanhaiyal and Sabitri were trying to deconstruct. Many of the narratives that define life code for Indians are mediated by a Brahmanical Patriarchy, such as the Hindu text *Manusmriti*. A woman in this system is a subject of caste and gender politics. Draupadi suffers as a tribal and a woman. *Draupadi* explores the potential of the wordscapes of body. The silenced subaltern subject speaks through her body. The myths attached to a woman's body are legitimized through narratives. Manipulation of knowledge bodies is the first hand tool of an oppressor.

Frederich Nietzsche's *On Genealogy of Morals* shatters the notions of a transcendental origin of morals. The moral system of any society is *man-made*. The ideas of good and bad in the Western society are attached to the nobility/working class power relations. This dichotomy works even within the women community. The experiences of an upper

class/middle class woman and a lower class woman in India are different and separate.

Draupadi, the victim of Army violence, wouldn't have experienced that had she been an upper class woman. This dichotomy manifests itself in the reactions to *Draupadi*. The women who questioned the morality of Sabitri are women who can't identify themselves completely with pain of the tribal woman. All they could possibly feel was a patronising sympathy. What they saw in Sabitri's performance was a violation of society's moral code. These women are products of an internalized self-subjugation. The public consciousness is largely the product of popular media in the country like TV and Cinema. They construct woman's body as an embodiment of sexuality. The distinct dance sequence named 'item song', an inseparable part of commercial cinema today is a heightened form of objectification of female body. So, when spectators use the sensibility with which they watch popular media to theatrical perception, the serious political cause of theatre is diluted. This is exemplified in the public censorship of *Draupadi*.

So what did *Draupadi* do to theatre in India? Nudity may not be anything new to theatres in the West. But considering India's volatile cultural system and the dominance of right wing politics in the country, *Draupadi* emboldens theatre. Though it was censored after a few performances, it made its impact both on theatre art as well as society. It prompts a scholar to consider many issues varying from the impact of a performance on gendered spectators to theatre as medium of social action. *Draupadi*'s closeness to its spectators also exemplifies theatre's reach as a medium. It challenges the notion of modern day theatre as a medium exclusive to intellectuals. The theatre's impact on marginalized is evident in the Manipuri women's protest. *Draupadi* re-establishes theatre as a medium of the commoner.

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